

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

UPDATE ON HORSEMEAT FRAUD

26 MARCH 2013

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Owen Paterson)

I would like to update the House on developments since my Written Ministerial Statement on 4 March 2013, Official Report, column 54WS, on the latest results from the testing of beef products for the presence of horsemeat.

In addition to the results of 5,430 industry tests reported to the House on 4 March 2013, Official Report, column 54WS, the Food Standards Agency has received further results from the UK-wide authenticity survey of beef products. The survey is of beef products on sale at a range of retail and catering outlets, with samples being collected by local authority enforcement officers across the UK. Public analysts are testing these products for both horse and pig DNA. Whilst the majority of testing has been completed, results of some analysis are still awaited.

A total of 364 samples have been taken in the first two phases of this survey, including beef burgers, beef meat balls, minced beef, beef ready meals and tinned beef products. Two products have been identified which did not meet the sampling and analytical criteria, giving 362 samples on which the Food Standards Agency will be reporting. Results for five samples are in dispute. Where results are disputed, a retained portion of the food sample may be sent for further, independent analysis.

Of the 357 samples for which analysis has been completed, all but five were clear of both horse and pig DNA at the 1% reporting limit. Two samples contained over 1% horse DNA and three samples contained over 1% pig DNA. All these products have been withdrawn from sale and named on the Food Standards Agency website.

There have been no positive tests to date for the presence of bute in any of the UK food samples found to contain horse DNA.

The Food Standards Agency met representatives of the food industry on 14 March to discuss future collaboration and reporting of test results. There was general agreement on four areas of future collaboration, for each of which the Food Standards Agency will now draw up implementation plans. These areas are describing good practice for food businesses in assuring their food chains, with a particular focus on supporting small and medium sized food businesses; an improved framework for securing and sharing intelligence; developing shared priorities for future food authenticity work; and creating a repository for sharing data and information.

Food industry representatives also agreed to continue to provide data on their ongoing tests for horse DNA in processed beef products, with identification of individual products testing positive above the 1% reporting limit. The Food Standards Agency will next publish a summary of this information in early June, and will continue to report individual products testing positive above the 1% reporting limit as soon as they are confirmed by the food industry.

Although in the short term our priority has been to focus on the deliberate substitution of beef with horse, this does not mean that we have ignored the possibility of beef products containing undeclared pork or pig DNA. Consumers have a right to expect that all the food they are eating is correctly described.

I recognise that even trace levels of pork contamination, below the 1% threshold, are unacceptable to some faith communities. Where a product is labelled as Halal and is found to contain traces of horse or pig DNA, the relevant local authority will investigate each case and take steps to ensure that consumers are informed.

It remains the responsibility of all food businesses (including processors, catering suppliers and retailers) to ensure that the food they sell is what it says it is on the label, and Kosher and Halal certification bodies have a part to play in this. Any claims on a product certified by a certification body must be accurate. It is for the certification body to set out the standards which a certified product must meet, and for that body to work with food businesses to ensure those standards are adhered to.

On 14 March senior officials from Defra, Food Standards Agency, DCLG and the Laboratory for the Government Chemist met with certifying organisations to discuss the Government's testing programme. The main focus was the testing programme for detecting horse and pig DNA in beef products. They also discussed research being undertaken on detection levels and cross contamination thresholds.

Investigations continue at a number of sites across the UK. City of London Police is the coordinating Police Authority for these investigations. At a European level the Food Standards Agency continues to work closely with the Commission and other Member States, sharing information via the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed.

We will be reporting the UK's contribution to the Europe-wide programme of testing to the European Commission in advance of the deadline of 15 April.

I will continue to keep the House informed.